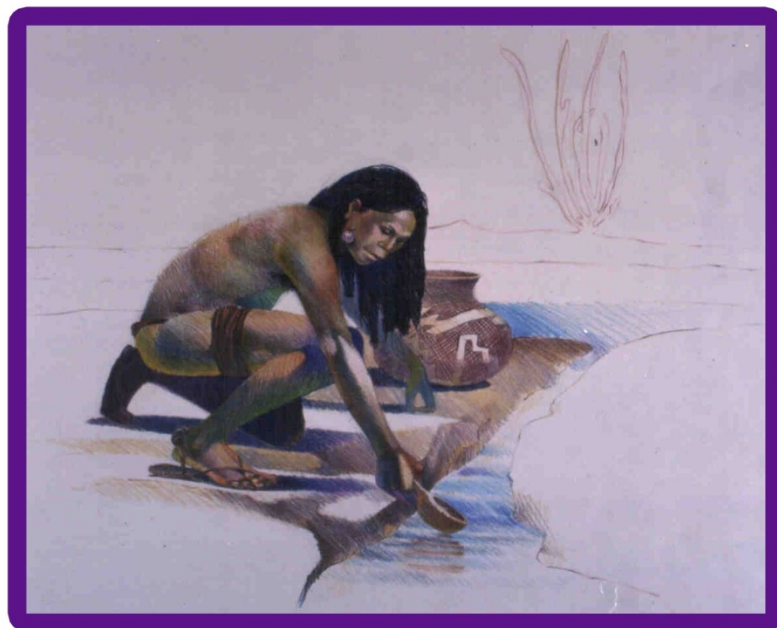


HOHOKAM!

Educator Resource Guide

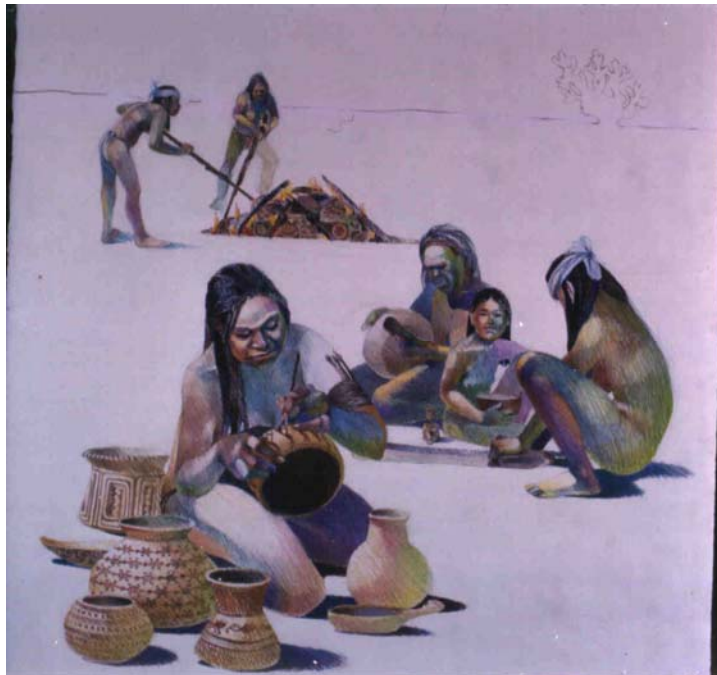


Arizona Museum of Natural History
53 N Macdonald St
Mesa, AZ 85201
480.644.2230 AzMNH.org

How Would You Like To:

- Live in a one-room house built of sticks and mud?
- Cheer for your favorite team as they play in a sunken ball court?
- Help dig an irrigation ditch and then take a cool swim in it?
- Grind corn on a metate so you could make your breakfast?
- Make your own pottery and bowl?
- Make shell and rock ornaments to wear or trade?
- Help plant seeds to grow corn, squash, beans, and cotton?

You might have done all of these things if you had been a Hohokam living along the Salt River or the Gila River 1200 years ago!



Who Were The Hohokam?

The group of people who we know as the Hohokam established villages along the Salt and Gila Rivers around 1 A.D. These people are called Hohokam by the Pima Indians, which means “all used up” in the Pima language. The Hohokam had a flourishing culture in the Salt River Valley, with villages, temple mounds, ball courts, trade routes, and the largest and most sophisticated irrigation system in the prehistoric New World. By 1450 A.D., the Hohokam culture had disappeared from the area. Little is known about where these early inhabitants of the desert went or what became of them, although some archaeologists think the Pima and the Papago Peoples are the descendants of the Hohokam.

The Prehistoric Canal System of the Hohokam

The Hohokam developed an irrigation system along the Salt and Gila Rivers that allowed them to plant crops and establish permanent villages. Many miles of canals and irrigation ditches were dug through the desert. This would have been very hard work; the Hohokam did not have metal tools, the wheel, horses or mules. All the canals were dug by hand using a digging stick weighted with a stone disc. Dirt was carried away in baskets. Keeping the canals clean and working was an ongoing job.



Photograph of a reconstructed Hohokam irrigation canal from the *Hohokam! Ancient Monuments of the Salt River Valley* exhibit at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



The Hohokam Diet

Their irrigation system allowed them to grow corn, cotton, beans and squash. The Hohokam also gathered the foods that grew naturally in the area and hunted a variety of birds, rabbits, deer and smaller animals. They may have also eaten fish and reptiles.

Corn was the staple of their diet. The Hohokam women used a flat, hollowed stone called a "metate" and a smaller stone called a "mano" to grind their corn. The kernels of corn were put in the hollowed metate and were ground by scraping and pressing it with the mano. The ground corn could then be made into a type of flat bread similar to a tortilla, cooked to make a porridge or used to thicken soups and stews.



Broken Metate and Mano. From the collections at the Arizona Museum of Natural History

A common feature of the Hohokam village was an "horno", or pit oven. Measuring as much as six feet in diameter and six feet deep, the horno was heated by mesquite fires to extreme high temperatures. Food, including agave hearts and corn, was placed in the heated earth oven, the oven was then covered with dirt to seal in the heat and the food was left to cook for hours.

Reproduction of an Hohokam horno, from the *Hohokam! Ancient Monuments of the Salt River Valley* exhibit at the Arizona Museum of Natural History



The Hohokam House

There is evidence Hohokam houses were often arranged in groups containing several related families. A typical Hohokam family group including aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents would have lived in a group of houses clustered around a rectangular courtyard. Meals would have been prepared here, and it would have been a work area where baskets, pottery and stone tools would be made.

A Hohokam village of 1200 years ago would have consisted one-room wattle and daub (sticks and mud) dwellings called pit houses. The house would have been recessed into the ground several inches and there would have been a tunnel-like entryway.

The Hohokam used mesquite, cottonwood, and juniper posts for wall and roof supports in their houses. Caliche mud was packed down to make a smooth floor and was also used over the twigs and brush that made up the walls and roof.

Each house had a small fire pit near the entryway. Most cooking was probably done outside the house in the courtyard where many other household chores took place.



Fire pit and metate and mano, from the *Ancient and Hohokam Cultures Gallery* at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Hohokam pithouse showing caliche roof, from the *Ancient and Hohokam Cultures Gallery* at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Hohokam Pottery

The Hohokam were expert pottery makers. Pottery pots and bowls were used for food storage, cooking and many other purposes. Pottery was made in a variety of shapes, depending upon how the individual pieces were to be used. They also developed a pottery shape, the Gila Shoulder, which was unique to their culture.

Clay was collected and mixed with water and kneaded in a mixing basin. Sand and mica were added to keep the clay from cracking. Early pots were made using the coil method; a method used by many ancient peoples of the Southwest. Later, the paddle and anvil method was used, in which a coil of clay was wound around an anvil (round stone) and a wooden paddle was used to smooth and shape the clay on the outside until it reached the desired shape and thickness.

The pottery was decorated in many ways and it was often as beautiful as it was useful. Perhaps the most distinctive is the "red on buff," where red designs, such as figures and geometric shapes, were painted on them with red pigment. The figures the Hohokam used on their pottery were the animals and plants they saw in the desert around them.

The containers were then fired or baked to make them hard. The pieces to be fired were placed in a pit in the ground and pieces of broken pottery or sherds were placed around it to help control the heat. Mesquite wood, which grew in the desert, was used as the fuel to fire the pottery.



Hohokam Red on Buff Gila Shoulder reproduction, from the collections at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Trading Goods

The Hohokam used the material around them to make almost everything they needed in everyday life. They did trade for items they could not grow or find in their desert home. These included vesicular basalt, turquoise, copper bells, Glycymeris clamshells from the Gulf of Baja in California, and exotic birds from the Yucatan Peninsula. Cotton thread and woven cloth, and corn were used as trade goods.

The clamshells and turquoise were used in jewelry making and there is evidence the exotic birds were treasured pets.



The Hohokam traded cotton thread and woven cotton fabric for copper bells, shells and exotic birds. All items are from the collection at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Copper bells and jewelry made of turquoise and shells from the *Ancient and Hohokam Cultures Gallery* at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Skilled Workers

The Hohokam were skilled workers in stone. Metates and Manos were shaped from stone, as well as bowls, palettes, and mortars and pestles. Highly polished axes, projectile points and even jewelry were created from stone.



Axe head from the collections at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.



Agave knife from the collections at the Arizona Museum of Natural History.

The Hohokam liked to wear jewelry and made bracelets, necklaces, rings, earrings and nose plugs. Necklaces were made of shells and small rock discs; sometimes they added pendants made of shell overlaid with turquoise. Delicately carved bracelets were made from clamshells. Olivella shells were strung on sinew to form necklaces.

The Hohokam were the first people to use etching. It is believed they may have used the fermented juice of the saguaro cactus to eat away designs on the shells.



Hohokam Ballgame

The Hohokam played a ballgame similar to those played in Mexico and Central America. Played in a sunken ball court, the game was often a fierce contest between neighboring villages. As in soccer today, the players were not allowed to use their hands in the game.

What Happened to the Hohokam?

The Hohokam were a resourceful people who dramatically changed their environment through irrigation technology to assure their survival in the deserts of central Arizona. These canals set the stage for the future settlement of Mesa and the surrounding area. Yet, by 1450 A.D. they deserted their farmlands along the rivers. Archaeologists have not yet been able to determine what happened to this once vibrant civilization.



Aerial view of the ruins of Mesa Grande,
a Hohokam temple mound in downtown Mesa.

